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Adorno On The Ethical and The Ineffable

by James Gordon Finlayson

Abstract

The interpretation of Adorno's philosophy I offer here is shaped by two problems: the problem of the availability of the good, which bears on Adorno's ethics and social theory, and the problem of the consistency of Adorno's ethics with the central tenets of his philosophical negativism. I show that there is a way of construing the relation between the ineffable and the ethical in Adorno's philosophy, which provides an account of the availability of the good that is compatible with his philosophical negativism. Naturally this is not a freestanding argument. It is an interpretation, one that is constrained by what I consider to be the most important, central and characteristic claims of Adorno's philosophy. The ancillary aim of this article is to take issue with a prevalent line of interpretation maintaining that Adorno's philosophy needlessly embraces paradox and aporia and thus lapses into irrationalism and mysticism.¹ This charge seems to be premised on a similarity between Adorno's philosophical negativism and negative theology. Unlike many defenders of Adorno, I do not deny that there is a similarity between a certain kind of negative theology and Adorno's philosophical concern with the ineffable. Properly understood, it throws light on his solution to the problem of the availability of the good. I do deny, however, that Adorno's negativism leads to any philosophically disreputable form of irrationalism or mysticism.

1. Three Central Theses of Adorno's Philosophy

In order to see why Adorno's ethics are problematic we must briefly consider the three central theses that encapsulate his philosophical negativism.

1. 'There is no way of living a false life correctly' (MM 39) ['Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen' (GS 4 p.43)].²

By this thesis Adorno means above all that in a false world there is no way of doing (and no way of knowing we are doing) the morally or politically right thing. Rational subjects cannot be sure that even apparently harmless or valuable activities are not contributing covertly and in spite of their

intentions to the general state of alienation and unfreedom that pervades modern (mid-twentieth Century) society. Second, it means that there is no real *living* in a false life.³ There are just various modes of surviving. Adorno thinks that as a result of the gradual spread of administrative systems and processes of commodification the social world has been systematically denuded of intrinsically valuable or worthwhile ends. Everything in the social world has come to exist for the sake of something else. This is the state of affairs that Adorno calls 'universal fungibility'. (PDM 228) What appear to be ends in themselves – say cultural activities and intellectual pursuits - have been annexed by all-pervasive forms of economy and administration and turned into mere means for the attainment of self-preservation. In sum, Adorno holds that in the modern, late-capitalist world nothing is good in itself save the end of self-preservation, and whatever is valuable is only instrumentally valuable for the control of nature and for self-preservation. (DA 9-48) Finally, we should note the implication of this thesis that, properly speaking, *life* is more than mere survival; it is living well or flourishing.⁴

2. The social world is *radically evil*. The second thesis is the key to understanding the first. Adorno thinks that his (and our) social world is radically evil. Throughout his writings Adorno never blushes at using terms like 'absolute evil' (DA 171, HTS 62), 'radically evil' (ND 23, 31, 365 & 23 MCP 114-5) and 'the bad' [*das Schlechte*] (ND 128). He thinks that social fabric of the post-war world, specifically America, Western Europe and the whole Eastern Bloc including the Soviet Union, is essentially corrupt or diseased [*Unheil*] (DE xv, DA 5 ND 128).

This thesis is easy to misunderstand. Adorno does not claim that the social world is evil because it led to the death camps. True, Auschwitz, and all it stands for (MCP 101 & 104) is a central theme of Adorno's social philosophy and he often intimates that any culture which allowed such appalling things to happen must be deeply flawed. However, Auschwitz is only a very vivid and horrible example of the radical evil of the social world - the commodification and bureaucratisation of genocide. Other examples include the atom bomb and the Vietnam war (MCP 101,104,116).

Equally, it is a mistake to think that this is an exaggerated way of stating that bourgeois capitalism is iniquitous. Adorno is a Marxist and believes that capitalism - the process of the reification of things and persons by which concrete use-values are reduced to abstract exchange-values - is nefarious. However, he departs from Marx insofar as he holds that capitalism is only symptomatic of a more fundamental evil. For Adorno, the underlying cause of radical evil is not socio-economic: it resides in the form of rationality itself.⁵

Adorno's use of the term 'radical evil' recalls Kant's in his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Kant claims that evil is not a moral quality that can be appropriately attributed to an individual's character on the basis of his actions. Rather it is a metaphysical property of the will, which explains people's apparently natural predisposition voluntarily, through weakness, selfishness or wickedness, to act heteronomously by pursuing ends given by sensible inclinations.⁶ For Adorno,

evil refers to the widespread and systematic tendency for people to choose their own unfreedom by adjusting to and accepting socially given norms and by pursuing socially given ends (MCP 115). Whilst both Kant and Adorno understand evil in terms of heteronomy or unfreedom, Adorno tends to attribute evil to the social mechanisms which induce people engage in heteronomous behaviour, whilst Kant attributes evil to the deficiency of the individual's will, which predisposes him to overlook autonomous morality and to follow the promptings of inclination instead.

There is a story or intellectual context that links the first two theses. The social world, according to Adorno, is governed by instrumental values and rationality has, in the course of the historical rise of Enlightenment thinking, degenerated into a kind of instrumental reasoning - the calculation of the most efficient means to given ends (DA 9-48). Significantly Adorno, like Kant, thinks that the normative authority of instrumental reasons is a form of heteronomy. Kant thinks this because he believes that the normative authority (and motivational force) of instrumental reasons for action is analytically contained in, and derived from, the willing of an end of action.⁷ Thus the 'ought' of a hypothetical imperative (if you want x, then you *ought* to do y) depends upon the empirical motivation to pursue a given end. Kant concludes that instrumental reasons are forms of causation - rational coercion or necessity - rather than expressions of the moral freedom of the will.⁸ A similar consideration seems to underlie Adorno's view that the context of universal fungibility - socially sedimented instrumental rationality - is a kind of institutionalised pattern of unfreedom. That said, Adorno's suspicion of instrumental reasoning is even more radical than Kant's. Kant subscribes roughly to Aristotle's definition of the human being as a rational animal and understands the rationality of persons - and not their animality - as the locus of their moral value. Kant is suspicious of instrumental rationality, because in his view it is subservient to man's animal nature, which itself is part of the closed and causally determined order of the world of appearances. Adorno is suspicious of instrumental rationality *per se*.

Actually Adorno makes two rather different claims about rationality. The first is historical and contingent. Adorno claims that Enlightenment privileges those kinds of knowledge - scientific and technological knowledge in particular - which are instrumental in that they enable human beings to control and to manipulate external nature. All rationality and reasoning has come to be defined by the Enlightenment as the accumulation of knowledge that is useful for the purpose of mastering the external world (DA 9-48).

The second claim is a more philosophical one. To think conceptually is to subsume particular instances under a general concept. Qua instances of a more general concept, particulars are made equal to, and infinitely substitutable for, one another.⁹ In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno calls this kind of knowing 'identity-thinking'. To think conceptually is to identify. This process of identifying particular things as tokens of more general types fixes and stabilizes meanings, rendering them more useful for the purpose of predicting and controlling nature. Adorno believes that this is the basic process behind

the process of reification, i.e. the domination of use-values by exchange-values that is characteristic of the commodity form (HTS 100).

So, unlike Kant, Adorno does not conceive instrumental rationality along standard lines as a kind of rationality or reasoning that is distinguished from other kinds of rationality or reasoning by virtue of its content, i.e. by its being reasoning about means. Nor is it the case that there is another kind of rationality or reasoning (reasoning about ends) that is exempt from suspicion. According to Adorno the concept is itself 'the organon of thinking', the purpose of which is to tame and subdue the external world in the interest of self-preservation (ND 27). For 'concepts on their part are moments of the reality [universal fungibility – GF] that require their formation, primarily for the control of nature' (ND 23). In other words any conceptual thought, *no matter what it is a thought about*, is a kind of instrument and to that extent a form of mastery.¹⁰

To appreciate the link between Enlightenment knowing/identity-thinking and the context of universal fungibility we have to paint in one further background assumption. This is the idealist thesis that runs from Kant right through German Idealism up to the neo-Kantianism of Weber's teacher Heinrich Rickert: that the conditions of concept-formation and of object-constitution are one and the same.¹¹ The industrialized and bureaucratised social world is the embodiment of instrumental rationality, because it is quite literally the product of identity thinking. Or rather, the social world of universal fungibility and identity-thinking are mutually co-determining. On the one hand identity-thinking feeds into and shapes the social world according to the demands of instrumental rationality. On the other, the context of universal fungibility feeds back and forms human thought and action, redefining rationality as a mere calculus for the efficiency of means. The upshot of this is that the very processes which were supposed to liberate human beings from subjugation by external nature rebound upon them and imprison them in a network of technological manipulation and administrative social control (DA 7-42). Furthermore, in becoming thus habituated to seeing and to treating objects merely as things to be manipulated and exploited for their own ends, people become habituated also to seeing and to treating other subjects likewise. This leads, ultimately, not just to their living a highly regimented life, but to their living a life of mutual domination and brutality.¹²

Now we are in a position to see why, if the social world is radically evil in the sense described above, there can be no correct living in it, namely because all the available options are covert forms of internal and external domination and control. At the same time, ironically, even the very survival of the human race has been placed in jeopardy by a world history that leads from primitive to ever more sophisticated and powerful forms of domination and destruction.

3. The third and final thesis is that we can have no positive conception of the good. Adorno frequently claims that the good (or what he calls variously 'reconciliation', 'redemption', 'happiness' and 'utopia') cannot be thought.

The materialist longing to conceive the thing, wants the opposite: the complete object is to be thought only in the absence of images. Such an absence converges with the theological ban on graven images. Materialism secularises it, by not permitting utopia to be pictured positively; that is the content of its negativity. (ND 207)

He does not only mean that we cannot represent or picture the good, utopia etc. We cannot even conceive it, because to conceive is to identify. Remember, Adorno claims that concepts are tools of thought which subserve the interest in the control of external nature, and that the conditions of concept formation and object constitution are one and the same. It follows that to form a concept of what is intrinsically good is to transform it into something that is only good for something else, namely for the purpose of self-preservation. Thus to conceive the good life is to falsify it in two rather different senses. First, it is to misconstrue the good life by forming a general concept of it and thus losing sight of the particularity and uniqueness of every individual good life: second, it is literally to make it bad, to transform it into evil by identifying it and making it the same as everything else.

2. Two Problems of Adorno's Ethics

The initial problem raised by Adorno's philosophical negativism is the problem of the availability of the good. These three central theses imply that no conception of goodness or moral rightness is available either to critical social theory or to ethics (in both senses of ethical theory and ethical actions.) This means that there is no moral normativity available to Adorno's philosophy; i.e. nothing that could justify the 'ought' claims of his social and ethical theory, and nothing that could give his philosophy a practical orientation to the present.

Moreover there is a problem that appears to be even more intractable. The three central theses seem to be inconsistent with a central part of Adorno's philosophical work. For Adorno does have an ethics:

4. In *Minima Moralia* and in the posthumously published lectures on *The Problems of Moral Philosophy* Adorno advances what we can best describe as an 'ethics of resistance'.¹³

Furthermore, as I will show:

5. The 'ethics of resistance' is a normative ethics.

It is not just a vague gesture towards 'the ethical', to use the meretricious *façon de parler* that has become the vogue: it is a normative moral theory which attempts to answer the questions of what one ought to do and why.¹⁴ I take it that any normative ethics presupposes the availability of some conception of goodness or rightness. The trouble is that this is what Adorno's philosophical negativism appears to rule out.

3. Adorno's Ethics of Resistance

Before I go on to look at these problems in more detail and to suggest a possible solution, I need to say something about Adorno's ethics of resistance. In particular I need to show that and why Adorno's

ethics of resistance is a normative ethics. Otherwise the problem of inconsistency won't seem compelling.

The ethics of resistance is Adorno's response to the thesis of *Minima Moralia*, that there is no correct way of living a false life. It is, as we will see, a kind of practical counterpart to the aporetic and self-limiting techniques of conceptual thinking he develops in *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno's ethics consists in various strategies of self-conscious non-cooperation with institutionalized forms of social unfreedom and with prevailing norms and values.¹⁵ He maintains that practical resistance to the bad is possible even in the absence of any positive conception of the good.

The only thing that can perhaps be said is, that the good life [*das richtige Leben*] today would consist in the shape of resistance against the forms of a false life [*eines falschen Lebens*], which has been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds. (PDM 249)

Is the ethics of resistance a normative ethics? Without doubt it is, because, firstly, it answers the normative question of what I ought to do, or rather not do. It tells us that we ought not to cooperate with or adjust to a life of universal fungibility. It thus gives a practical, albeit negative, orientation to the present. Secondly, Adorno tells us why one ought not to do what one ought not to do. Because of the single and fundamental moral obligation, which Adorno contends, Hitler has imposed on mankind, namely: 'to order their thought and actions such that Auschwitz never reoccur, nothing similar ever happen.' (ND 358) ¹⁶ An ethics of resistance is an ethics that is designed first and foremost to prevent the worst, where the worst is the 'repetition of Auschwitz' or of something similar (CM 199: MCP 116).

Thirdly, although Adorno never states this explicitly, there appear to be three virtues or personal qualities that individuals must have, if they are to be capable of doing what an ethics of resistance recommends. These are the virtues of *Mündigkeit*, humility [*Bescheidenheit*] and affection. Let me briefly say something about each.

Adorno takes the term *Mündigkeit* from Kant, who uses it to mean something like the capacity to use one's own understanding.¹⁷ For Adorno it means the capacity to take a stand, to refuse to capitulate, adjust to or otherwise play along with institutional forms of heteronomy.¹⁸ Adorno conceives *Mündigkeit* in contradistinction to what he considers to be the dubious conception of moral autonomy found in Kant, which he thinks of as the self-assertion of rational subjectivity.¹⁹ *Mündigkeit*, for Adorno, is the capacity 'to hold fast to normativity...to the question of right and wrong' on the one hand and simultaneously 'to a critique of the fallibility of that authority which has the confidence to undertake such a self-criticism' on the other (PDM 250). In other words *Mündigkeit* is the capacity to take a critical stand, but which is also conscious of its own fallibility, and modified by continual vigilant self-criticism. It is in this sense only that Adorno claims: 'The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is *Mündigkeit*, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of self-determination, of not cooperating.' (CM 195) I take it that he means that so long as

there are enough mature [*mündige*] people at large the moral minimum – the prevention of the reoccurrence of *Auschwitz* or any similar atrocity – may be attained.

Humility is precisely what keeps Kantian moral autonomy in check, what prevents conscience from ossifying into moralistic righteousness, and what differentiates *Mündigkeit* from mere rational self-assertion. It is the consciousness of one's own fallibility (PDM 251-2. See also ND 222 & MCP 141-2). It is the refusal of self-assertion [*(d)ieses nicht-sich-selber-Setzen*], a refusal which implies the capacity 'to do justice to what is other, won from reflection on one's own limitations' (PDM 251). If pressed, Adorno says, to name the cardinal virtues of today, he could think of none save humility [*Bescheidenheit*].

By affection I mean the capacity to be moved by, not to be indifferent or cold towards, the fate of others. Sometimes Adorno speaks, albeit in a highly qualified way, of love. By this he does not mean sexual love, or even Romantic love, both of which he subjects to severe criticism. He means simply the spontaneous outpouring of warmth and affection. What attracts him to the notion of love, something he praises even in the Christian conception of *agape*, is first, its immediacy, and second, its inability to be commanded, exhorted or morally obliged. The very idea that one ought to love offends against the concept, 'is itself part of the ideology that coldness perpetuates' (CM 202). Love is and can only be offered and received as a gift. It is the very opposite of coldness and indifference, which is, as he memorably puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, 'the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity... without which Auschwitz would not have been possible' (ND 356 & CM 201). What I call the capacity of affection, then, includes sensitivity to and solidarity with others, vulnerability, a sense of dependence on other things and on other people and, above all, a kind of mutuality that is not mediated by exchange, reason or self-interest.

The exercise of these virtues is not constitutive of human flourishing, so they are really virtues in Aristotle's sense. They are at most prerequisites of the only good life available in a radically evil world. They are personal qualities that individuals must possess if they are to be in a position to perform ethical acts of resistance, and further, supposing there are enough people willing and able to exercise them, if they are to prevent the reoccurrence of *Auschwitz* or anything similar. They represent, respectively, negations of what Adorno considers to be three constitutive characteristics of an ethos that singularly failed to prevent, and in that sense led to, the collective moral catastrophe that occurred under National Socialism, namely norm-conformism or submission to authority; self-confidence or self-certainty; and coldness or indifference. Adorno accords the three virtues of *Mündigkeit*, humility and affection a normative moral status, as necessary conditions of an ethics of resistance. To act ethically is to be appropriately *mündig*, humble, and capable of affection.

4. Adorno's Negativism and the Availability of the Good

The above considerations show convincingly that Adorno's ethics of resistance is a normative ethics. And a normative ethics presupposes the availability of some kind of normativity. But is it

obvious that an ethics of resistance requires a positive conception of the good or of moral rightness? If not, it is not obvious that Adorno's ethics is in conflict with the three central theses. What if sheer negativity – the disvalue embedded in the social world – could serve as the normative basis for an ethics of resistance? After all, Adorno repeatedly claims that the social world and our life in it are 'false' or untrue. To modern ears this is a somewhat strange way of saying that the world is bad. Adorno follows Plato insofar as he conceives truth as an aspect of the good, or rather the converse, untruth as an aspect of the bad. He also follows Hegel insofar as his conception of untruth 'aims at bad actuality'.²⁰ This means that for Adorno untruth is embodied in the social world. A false world, in Adorno's sense, is a bad, indeed a radically evil, social world, and his social theory answers to a world 'which is thoroughly false' [(*Sie*) reagiert auf die bis innerste falsche Welt ND 41].²¹ Adorno, then, appears to think that we can reliably know that the world is false or radically evil. Thus, in the *Problems of Moral Philosophy* he claims that the 'critique of the administered world' must take the form of 'the concrete denunciation of the inhuman'. We are in a position to make such criticisms, he avers, because, even whilst we have no positive normative conception of humanity and no positive conception of 'absolute goods' and 'absolute norms', we nonetheless all can and do know intuitively what inhumanity is (PDM 260ff.).²² Elsewhere Adorno claims that we have a kind of precognitive, intuitive sense of the evil of the world. This can take the form of a mood of despair at the greyness, [*das Grau* ND 370] or the horror [*das Grauen* AT 127] of the world. Or it can take the form of the 'shudder', a negative form the experience of wonder at the world, a kind of involuntary fright at the awfulness of reality. For a variety of complex reasons Adorno contends that some modern art works, for example Kafka's novels and Beckett's plays, are uniquely capable of embodying and manifesting this intuition in symbolic form.²³ Although this intuition of the awfulness of social reality is not the message of such works, it is what he calls their truth-content. Either way - either directly or mediated via a certain kind of aesthetic experience - claims Adorno, we have reliable intuitive access to the existing untruth of the world, to the 'fact' that the social world is radically evil. Moreover, this knowledge that the world is radically evil is not contrastive: it does not presuppose knowledge of what a correct or good world would be, in much the same way that our immediate knowledge that pain or suffering is bad, presupposes no antecedent knowledge of what is pleasurable.²⁴

There are several difficulties with this view. For one thing, suppose we grant that the social world is indeed radically evil, it still is not a promising basis for a normative ethics. The mere prevention of 'barbarism', to borrow Adorno's term, leaves too much open and provides none of the constraints on individual action we typically expect from a normative ethical theory. Against this, we must remember that Adorno is of the view that we are living in a situation of moral emergency or of ongoing moral catastrophe. In that context, the single ideal 'never again Auschwitz' stands as a kind of absolute moral minimum that must be striven for whatever else can or cannot be achieved (CM 199-204).

But there is a second, much deeper worry. On this interpretation, the ethics of resistance provides little or no practical orientation to the present, for it appears to ask us to resist everything at once. What can total resistance amount to, practically speaking, apart from total inactivity? This worry is a serious one, and it lends credence to the popular caricature of Adorno as a mandarin aesthete who provided himself with very clever excuses for retreating from the world of action and resigning himself to a quiet life spent contemplating works of high modernist art.²⁵ As a matter of fact this caricature is unfair. Adorno thought an ethics of resistance appropriate to the modern world precisely because it contained so many developments that were worth resisting. Contrary to his own caricature, he was himself prodigiously active throughout his career as a journalist, music critic, radio broadcaster, university lecturer and philosopher. Look closely and one can see that each of these pursuits was in itself a form of resistance. For example he took a very keen interest in the question of education. One of his functions after the war was to conduct an oral examination of future high-school teachers. He was extremely concerned that the examination fulfil its aim of testing the ability of candidates to reflect on the wider culture significance of the philosophy they had studied, rather than simply testing memorized facts about what a particular philosopher had written (CM 19-35). In his public lectures Adorno developed the controversial view that the model of psychoanalytic reflection might aid the formation of school children into independent-minded adults, and prevent their being schooled into a mentality of passive acceptance and norm-conformism.²⁶ Again, whenever Adorno lectured or wrote about music, he always aimed to make people engage intellectually with the work and to prevent them from simply consuming and enjoying it uncritically. Even Adorno's disquisition on correct punctuation is less a treatise on dialectical sentence construction, than a polemic against the 'dumbing down' of language, in particular against what he considered to be the positivist ideology that individual sentences correspond to discrete bits of reality.²⁷

If we take Adorno's own life as an example, we can see that in his view an ethics of resistance need not be an excuse for resignation and a recipe for quietism. At the same time however we have to modify our understanding of the second central thesis of Adorno's negativism, that the social world is radically evil. There must be something positive, some reliable values in virtue of which these acts of resistance are to be performed. It would be self-defeating for Adorno to ground an ethics of resistance simply on the extant negative value of the social world. We have already seen that an ethics of resistance presupposes at least the virtues of *Mündigkeit*, modesty and affection. Adorno cannot claim that what makes these virtues, or their exercise, good or right, is merely that they somehow resist the extant evil of the social world, that they hinder the course of that world or prevent its reproduction. For that would imply that acts of *Mündigkeit*, modesty and affection, if they are good, are *only* good as means of resisting incorporation into the radically evil social world. But if such acts are only instrumentally valuable, they are part of the very context of universal fungibility they are supposed to resist; they are themselves radically evil. Citing lines, however wonderful, from Hölderlin's poem *Patmos*, 'Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch,' [Where there is danger, the saving power

increases, too] won't save him from this objection (DA 53). Neither will recondite allusions to Hegel's allusion to the story about the wound healed by the very the spear which inflicted it (HTS 74). It seems, then, that Adorno's ethics cannot make do with the availability of the bad as its sole normative ground. He has somehow to secure the availability of the good, and yet do so in a way that is consistent with the three central theses. Adorno faces a dilemma: either he avails himself of some positive conception of goodness or rightness and gives up his philosophical negativism, or he remains resolutely negativistic and loses the moral dimension to his demand for resistance.

Adorno is sometimes tempted to respond to this dilemma by means of an inverted Hegelian dialectic. According to Michael Theunissen, Adorno seeks to make the good available for critical social theory by reading the truth of what ought to be from the traces of its reflection in the existing untruth of what ought not to be. He does this both in *Minima Moralia*, where he seeks the truth about life everywhere in its 'alienated form' (MM 15) and in *Negative Dialectics*, where he has recourse to the following metaphor:

Consciousness could not despair over the grey, if it did not harbor the concept of a different colour whose scattered traces are not absent from the negative whole. (ND 370)

However this method of securing the availability of the good flatly contravenes Adorno's philosophical negativism, the ban on graven images. It is, Theunissen argues, 'prenegativistic' and 'not negative enough'. Adorno's attempt to trace 'a real path of the positive in the negative' amounts to an inverted version of Hegelian optimism, of reading the traces of rationality in the actual.²⁸ We should recall that one of the points on which Adorno decisively parts company with Hegel is his rejection of the doctrine of determinate negation, the view that the negation of a negative yields a positive (ND 164: MCP 144). Adorno's rejection of Hegel's doctrine is particularly apt in this context, since it is consistent with semantics of the moral terms 'right' and 'wrong'. 'Not wrong' is not equivalent with 'right'. The upshot is that even if we can have reliable knowledge of what is wrong, we cannot deduce by logical negation alone what is right.

Theunissen is right to reject Adorno's inverted Hegelian attempt to secure the availability of an absent good. But there is another more promising way in which Adorno attempts to solve the problem of the availability of the good. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno claims that philosophy is essentially concerned to think the ineffable.²⁹ I use the unprejudicial term 'the ineffable' here to refer to the panoply of Adorno's various locutions for what escapes conceptual thought: 'the other', 'otherness', 'the non-identical' 'the non-conceptual', 'the unrepresentable', 'the inexpressible', 'the unsayable' etc.³⁰ Adorno hints that a potential for what he calls variously 'emancipation', 'redemption', 'utopia' and 'reconciliation' - a kind of hidden good - resides in what is ineffable, i.e. in whatever cannot be thought by concepts. Philosophy, in aiming at the ineffable, aims at this hidden good. By attempting to think the ineffable, even in the self-conscious awareness of the paradoxical nature of that attempt, it succeeds somehow in making available to philosophy a kind of goodness. If

this view is tenable, the conception of philosophy Adorno develops in *Negative Dialectics* might pave the way to a normative ethics of resistance that is consistent with his philosophical negativism.

5. Adorno and the Ineffable.

As we have seen the ban on graven images is the theological motif that Adorno uses to illustrate his philosophical negativism. Adorno's thesis that philosophy is essentially concerned with the ineffable goes hand in hand with his negativism. Adorno is committed to the following three claims.

1. Philosophy cannot but aim at the good.

Adorno is committed to this by what I earlier called his Platonism, his view that the untrue, the false, is an aspect of the bad. Adorno's conception of philosophical critique is critical in that it always aims at utopia, reconciliation, the good or whatever. Even if condemned only to reflect on the bad, the horrible, on extant evil it must do so from the standpoint of, or in the light of redemption, utopia, the good etc. (MM 247).

2. To think philosophically is to think in concepts.
3. One cannot think the good by means of concepts without identifying it and thereby doing it an injustice. The injustice it would perpetrate is something like the sin of idolatry, attributing the properties of an image or likeness of God, to God's essence.

Consequently Adorno has to seek a non-discursive or non-conceptual mode of access to the good. This is why he claims that philosophy is essentially concerned with the ineffable.

At this point even Adorno's most sympathetic critics - Albrecht Wellmer, Herbert Schnädelbach and Jürgen Habermas to name but the most prominent - suspect that he lapses into irrationalism and mysticism.³¹ This charge is often brought because of the striking parallel between Adorno and negative theology. Adorno's negativistic solution to the problem of the availability (or non-availability) of the good parallels negative theology's solution to the problem of the availability (or non-availability) of a transcendent God. And the tradition of negative theology has affinities with mysticism and irrationalism.

However, that there is such a parallel between Adorno's conception of a negative dialectic and certain aspects of negative theology, even if true, is not itself a good objection. Even if negative theology does lapse into irrationalism and mysticism, it is not obvious that the very attempt to think the ineffable need do so. What I propose to do, *pace* Adorno's critics, is to develop the parallel between Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and one example of negative theology in order to show, rather more perspicuously than some of Adorno's own programmatic asseverations, that there is a philosophically legitimate and coherent use for the notion of the ineffable. For this reason I now turn briefly to *De Docta Ignorantia* the early work of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64).

6. Nicholas of Cusa's Negative theology

It is worth noting, just for the record, that Nicholas is a late-mediaeval or early Renaissance *rationalist*. Whilst influenced by mysticism and allowing a place for it in his work, Nicholas is not and does not consider himself to be an irrationalist.³² In *Of Learned Ignorance*, Nicholas begins from the assumption that God is the true infinite. However, all finite inquiry, including that of mathematics, proceeds by means of comparison. But the infinite is necessarily beyond all comparative relations. 'Hence, the infinite, qua infinite, is unknown.' (OLI 1, 2) Therefore, God, qua infinite being, is unknown. 'Sacred ignorance has taught us that God is ineffable. He is so because he is infinitely greater than all nameable things.' (OLI 1, 26)

For this reason, Nicholas, unlike the Scholastics, does not try to establish the existence of God. Rather he assumes that God, the infinite being, exists. The point of his inquiry is to proceed anyway, cognizant of the fact that finite categories necessarily fail to grasp God's infinite being, in order to discover, through the failure to reveal God's essence, something important about the limits of human knowledge. The doctrine of epistemological modesty that emerges applies not just to knowledge of God's infinite being, but to all knowledge including knowledge of finite beings. Nicholas states that 'the intellect, which is not truth, never comprehends truth so precisely that truth cannot be comprehended infinitely more precisely.' (OLI 1, 3) He compares the relation between our finite intellect and the truth with the relation between an inscribed polygon and an inscribed circle. The resemblance between the polygon and the circle grows with the multiplication of the angles of the polygon. However no multiplication of the angles of the polygon, however great, will make the polygon equal the circle. [Fig 1] Later Nicholas uses an even more suggestive analogy, which concerns one of the paradoxes of the infinitely large. Take a circle of any diameter you care. As the length of the diameter increases, so the arc on the circumference decreases. When you extend the diameter to infinity, the arc of the circumference is no different to a straight line. [Fig. 2]

Hence the straight line AB will be the arc of the maximum circle, which cannot be greater...Indeed, in the maximum line curvature is straightness (OLI 1, 13).

This analogy is of especial importance to Nicholas, because he takes it as evidence for his dialectical thesis that God – the true infinite – is the coincidence of opposites.³³

It might be objected that this is not a genuine paradox. It is just incoherent to think of an infinitely large circle, as having a circumference. After all, the circumference begins where the radius ends, and to think of the circumference of an infinitely large circle, means thinking of a line – the radius – as extending (in one direction) to infinity and as coming to an end where it meets the circumference. Perhaps it should be thought of as a plane stretching equally far in all directions from a central point. There would seem to be nothing objectionable about thinking of each line leading away from a central point as being potentially infinitely long, and thus as the radius of a circle that is potentially infinitely large.³⁴ For the sake of argument let us suppose it is a genuine paradox – a contradiction generated by valid reasoning from premises, none of which, on reflection, can reasonably be rejected.

I am not concerned here with the conclusions that Nicholas actually wants to draw from this apparent paradox, namely that God's infinite being, as the transcendent resolution of opposites cannot be thought discursively, but only apprehended mystically, as Jasper Hopkins argues, through 'symbols, riddles, enigmas, mysteries'.³⁵ The necessity for a mystical encounter with God is supposed to provide evidence for an ineffable truth contained in the symbolic and mysterious doctrines of revealed religion. These intended conclusions are illegitimate anyway; they do not follow from the doctrine of ignorance. The real point of interest here, the salient point of the comparison with Adorno, is the legitimate conclusion to which Nicholas is entitled. What we acquire and learn from the paradoxes in which the attempt to think God's infinite being issues, is knowledge of our own ignorance. That is why this ignorance is *learned*. It is a kind of wisdom; a wisdom of not-knowing. Through the consistent application of mathematical concepts we gain an ineffable insight into something that exceeds finite conceptual categories. This insight is not a thought; it is not conceptual. But it is a kind of knowledge very broadly speaking, it is something that we acquire or learn through the process of thinking, or better still through the experience of trying, but failing, to think something that eludes conceptual thought. It is the insight we gain when rational thought comes up against its own limits.

Furthermore, this ineffable insight puts one in touch with what cannot be thought, in such a way that one stands in relation to it - the relation of not-knowing. For Nicholas this, in turn tells us something that is both practically and theoretically important about our relation to God. It warns us, that to assume we can gain positive knowledge God's essence through the application of finite categories, is to be guilty of the sin of idolatry: because this way of thinking 'ascribes to the image that which befits only the reality itself' (OLI 1, 26).

7. Adorno and Negative Theology

The notion of ineffable insight or ineffable knowledge which I think is in play here, is one which has been elucidated by Adrian Moore.³⁶ Moore elucidates the notion with the help of Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing in the *Tractatus*. On Moore's analysis, to have an ineffable insight, is to be shown something that one cannot put into words. To be shown something is, he contends, is to be self-consciously receptive to something that strikes us, when we direct our attention appropriately toward whatever it is that cannot be thought.³⁷ It is not to claim that there is a thought which cannot be expressed in language. (One conviction, which incidentally Adorno and Wittgenstein share, is that thinking, the use of concepts, is essentially linguistic.³⁸)

However the notion of an ineffable insight must be handled very carefully, more carefully than Adorno himself sometimes does. It is for example not quite accurate to claim, as Adorno does, simply that the concern [*Interesse*] of philosophy is: 'against Wittgenstein to say what cannot be said' (ND 21: HTS 102). What cannot be said cannot be said, and the very attempt to say it is incoherent. What Adorno should say is that philosophy's concern is to reflect on its inevitable failure to say what cannot

be said and to describe the experience of being shown something that arises from that failure. Furthermore, one must not, as Adorno sometimes does, conflate the inconceivable [*das Nichtbegriffliche, das Begrifflose*, ND 24 & 27] with the ineffable. This is apt to confuse, because there are all kinds of inconceivable things, such as square circles, (p and not-p) etc. The attempt to conceive such inconceivables is a misuse of concepts that gives rise to incoherent thoughts, not a reflection that leads to ineffable insights.

Once these caveats have been made I think that the notion of an ineffable insight can capture one of the central notions of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, namely thinking in constellations. For Adorno thinking in constellations is a way of seeing the tensions and inconsistencies generated by the attempt to say the unsayable as philosophically fruitful ways of indicating the limits of representational thinking.

Constellations, alone, represent from without what the concept has excised within, the 'more' which the concept strives to be, and fails to be in equal measure (ND 164). Constellations, Adorno argues, are essentially expressions of a relation to the non-conceptual. They attend to their object without subsuming it, and by reflecting on their failure, succeed where conceptual (identifying) thought fails, in 'communicating' their relation to what is other than them. (ND 165) ³⁹

The utopia of knowledge would be to open up the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it identical to them. (ND 21)

There is a lot more to say about Adorno's notion of a constellation, but the key points in this context are that it is a way of thinking with concepts, which is attentive, receptive, inherently self-conscious and which establishes a relation to something non-conceptual. If that is so, then what Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and Nicholas of Cusa's negative theology have in common, is not so much a penchant for mysticism and irrationalism, than philosophically respectable concern with the ineffable. Their concern with the ineffable is philosophically respectable because, whilst it is incoherent and self-defeating to try to say what cannot be said, it is neither incoherent nor self-defeating to attempt to put into words the experience of being shown something which emerges from the self-consciously failed attempt to say the unsayable. The point of comparison on which I want to focus is that in both cases something important and valuable emerges from the experience of having an ineffable insight, of being shown something that cannot be put into words.

The notion of showing and not saying is apt here because it prevents us succumbing to the temptation to attribute existence to that into which one has an ineffable insight. Adorno is insistent that whatever it is we gain an insight into – 'utopia' as he sometimes calls it or 'the possible' – does not exist.⁴⁰ This is crucial, because the temptation to assume that the good exists leads naturally the mistake of thinking that one can say what it consists in. Nicholas makes these illicit moves because he wants to justify a certain Judaeo-Christian conception of God, as an omnipotent, beneficent and omniscient being. By contrast, on the view I am putting forward, Adorno need not and does not make

the neo-Platonist sounding claim that the good exists but that we cannot conceive it. He need not even go so far as to suggest that what we are shown, but cannot say, is the good, utopia, redemption etc. He need claim only that in the attempt to think what is non-identical to the concept, we are shown something more than what is contained in the finite knowable world and that this is a valuable experience. Adorno's most insightful and self-consistent statements about the non-identical make just such a claim.

Even its (thought's) own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.' (MM 247)⁴¹

8. Adorno On The Ineffable and the Ethical

The parallel between Adorno's philosophical concern with the ineffable and negative theology suggests the lineaments of an argument which can solve the two problems of Adorno's ethics we began with. This argument must show that Adorno's attempt to think the ineffable can make available a kind of moral normativity whilst remaining consistent to his philosophical negativism. The argument goes as follows.⁴² When we are led to an ineffable insight we put ourselves into a self-consciously receptive relation to whatever it is that cannot be thought. Being led to an ineffable insight into something that is shown to us, is an intrinsically valuable experience. It is vital to the argument that the value of the self-consciously receptive experience of being led to an ineffable insight does not derive from its being a concrete conception of the good into which we have an ineffable insight. The argument depends only on the premise that gaining an ineffable insight into something is itself an intrinsically valuable experience. This value does not fall from without, it comes from within, i.e. from the particular way in which one is brought self-consciously to attend to the finitude of one's own cognitive capacities.⁴³

Can it fairly be claimed that the experience of having an ineffable insight is intrinsically valuable? Adorno does claim as much and indeed he must. Throughout his life he associates happiness [*Glück*] with knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] and in his mature works comes to see the happiness of knowledge '*Glück der Erkenntnis*' as the only form of happiness left to modern man (ÄT 26).⁴⁴ The question is, is he *entitled* to claim that ineffable knowledge is inherently valuable? Once again Moore provides a general argument that can help Adorno out. In very broad strokes, knowledge is among other things a dispositional state which explains purposive activity. States of knowledge are instrumentally valuable insofar as they are dispositions to act in ways that deliver goods to knowers by satisfying their desires. Assume that all representational knowledge ('knowledge that' or what Adorno calls identifying knowledge) is effable. Representational knowledge has certain essential features which ineffable knowledge does not, one of which is transparency. When one reflects on states of effable knowledge one can see through them to the goods that, other things being equal, they deliver, by enabling the knower to satisfy her desires. To know something effably entails that one can

come to know what that knowledge is good for. Ineffable knowledge is not transparent in this way; it is opaque. When one self-consciously reflects on it, only the state of knowledge itself comes into view. What this means is that the good that a state of ineffable knowledge delivers is nothing but the good of being in that state. It follows that ineffable knowledge is good in itself, not merely instrumentally good as a disposition that, other things being equal, enables the knower to satisfy her desires. I say not *merely*, because ineffable knowledge might also, but opaquely – at a level beyond the ken of the knower – be instrumentally good.⁴⁵

If this account of ineffable knowledge is correct, then Adorno is not committed to the view that having an ineffable insight is merely instrumentally valuable even on his very broad understanding of instrumental. The relation of self-conscious receptivity in which one stands to what is shown is by definition not a conceptual relation. An ineffable insight is good, but it is not a *conception* of something, therefore, it is not an instance of identity-thinking and not part of the context of universal fungibility Adorno is criticizing.

It might be objected that in order to claim that being shown something is an intrinsically valuable experience one has to trust the practices, say, language or mathematics, by means of which we are shown what we are shown. This is true for Wittgenstein and also for Nicholas, although for very different reasons.⁴⁶ However, so the objection goes, Adorno is deeply suspicious of all social practices, of language itself and especially of logic and mathematics (DA 9-48). They are forms of Enlightenment, and Enlightenment is a form of domination. How then can we be sure that the experience of being shown something is not just another form of ideological illusion, just another form of covert domination and control?

One cannot counter this objection just by pointing out that Adorno does exempt certain kinds of practice – namely a certain narrowly circumscribed artistic modernism – from his general suspicion. It is nonetheless true that Adorno believes that certain works of modern art succeed in embodying in a sensible form a truth content that cannot be grasped conceptually. Works of art can, he believes, be a source of experience that can lead to ineffable insight. However, he also claims that art works require philosophical interpretation if they are to yield these insights, their truth-content (AT 126-9). To be open to aesthetic experience is not to be *non-theoretically* or pre-theoretically receptive. Adorno's critique of the culinary enjoyment of works of art implies that he thinks that receptivity, is only necessary but not sufficient for aesthetic experience. Philosophical reflection is also always necessary.

One can partly allay this objection by noting that Adorno has at least sufficient confidence in the value of language, reason and argument that he never gives up on them. Adorno and Horkheimer claim in the preface to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that even though Enlightenment is a form of domination in the interest of self-preservation, it is not only that, for 'social freedom is inseparable from Enlightenment thinking' (DA 3). This is the thought from which Adorno later weaves the fabric of *Negative Dialectics*. Even if concepts are instruments, they can and do point beyond themselves and

thereby transcend their own instrumental value. Therefore Adorno does trust these practices to a degree; he trusts that the saving power grows where the danger lies. Of course this trust falls way short of certainty. The ethics of resistance is different in kind to Kantian ethics, which in Adorno's eyes makes the mistake of trying to stand morality on the sure footing of pure reason. To be *mündig*, modest and capable of affection is to do without certainty. The value of an ineffable insight is thus not transmitted upwards from the value of the practice of philosophical reasoning through which that insight is reached. The practice is the vehicle for the insight, but the value lies in experience of being shown something, of becoming self-consciously receptive to something that is more than can be put into words, a surplus, which Adorno takes as a promise that the realm of the possible outstrips the real and the conceptual (MM 253).⁴⁷

Once it is accepted that the experience of having an ineffable insight is intrinsically valuable, the final step of the argument is to show that such experiences can serve as the normative basis of an ethics of resistance. The value of the experience of being shown something is inherently practical, for ineffable knowledge just is a disposition to act in certain ways. On this reading the three virtues, which I have argued are necessary conditions of an ethics of resistance, just are states of ineffable practical knowledge, competencies which enable subjects to bring about the goods of *Mündigkeit*, humility and love. Consider what Adorno thinks it is to be *mündig*. To be *mündig* is to be able to think for oneself. Thinking for oneself, in the form of reflecting on one's experience is necessary if one is to be shown anything. It is not a matter of merely passive receptivity. Moreover no-one can do this reflecting in one's stead, only the person whose experience it is can do it, and each person can only reflect directly on their own experience. *Mündigkeit* is also the capacity to take a stand, to say no. The virtue of humility is the reverse side of *Mündigkeit*. Adorno's philosophical concern with the ineffable is a doctrine of epistemological modesty. The practical upshot of this doctrine is to prevent the *Mündigkeit* of rational beings from degenerating into rational self-assertion. The virtue of humility, Adorno claims, is the capacity 'to do justice to what is other, won from reflection on one's own limitations' (PDM 251). Finally, there is the capacity for affection. Recall that the experience of having an ineffable insight is a mode of self-conscious receptivity, a way of being sensitive and attentive to what cannot be conceived. Adorno's claim is that at a very deep level the capacity to love, to receive affection from and to show affection to other people, is closely linked the capacity to be affected by anything.⁴⁸

If I am right about this, I have to modify an earlier claim. I began by saying that what makes Adorno's ethics of resistance a normative ethics is that it tells us what we ought to do and why we ought to do it. I think that is still true. But it was misleading of me to suggest that the reason why one ought to be *mündig*, modest and capable of affection is that one can thereby prevent Auschwitz's reoccurring. Adorno could only make that claim if these virtues were transparent in the same way that states of effable knowledge are. But as we have seen ineffable insights are opaque. What Adorno should rather say is that acts of *Mündigkeit*, modesty and love should be performed for their own

sake. But that is something he should be happy enough to claim. That such acts might lead at a level beyond the agent's ken to the prevention of a greater evil, is at best a speculation on Adorno's part, a rational hope. Adorno cannot say that this is the right reason for performing those acts.

9. Conclusion and Critical Coda

I have attempted to make a case for the view that the intrinsically valuable experience of having an ineffable insight can serve as the normative basis of Adorno's ethics of resistance. This is I think the only viable solution to the problem of the availability of the good that is open to Adorno. Adorno is not, on this interpretation, guilty of lapsing into mysticism or irrationalism, he is just developing the practical implications of a coherent and philosophically legitimate concern with the ineffable. Nor is he open to the objection that his ethics of resistance is self-undermining, because acts of *Mündigkeit*, modesty and affection are merely instrumentally valuable, and thus are part of the context of universal fungibility they are supposed to resist. Finally, Adorno is not, on this view, being inconsistent by endorsing a normative ethics. Adorno can consistently endorse an ethics of resistance on the one hand and maintain, on the other, that we have no positive *conception* of what the good life is. It is still true that there is no correct way to live a false world, because under present circumstances acts of *Mündigkeit*, modesty and affection do not amount to a good life in the sense of fulfilled and happy life. They are ways of not co-operating with a bad life and may well lead instead to frustration, isolation, alienation and despair.⁴⁹ We must not however, if my interpretation is right, understand his thesis there is no correct living in a false world to imply that there is no intrinsic moral value in the world. There is some intrinsic moral value in the experience of having ineffable insights, and in the practical manifestation of this experience in acts of ethical resistance. This is the *Glück der Erkenntnis* which is left to us.

* * *

The interpretation I have offered here is intended to be a defence of the consistency of Adorno's ethics of resistance with his wider philosophy. It is not intended to be a defence of the soundness of Adorno's whole conception of ethics. In the final analysis Adorno's premise that the social world is radically evil is unwarranted, unsupported even by the evidence, however vivid and extreme, of the historical example of Auschwitz. Without that premise there is no reason to accept that the best we can do, ethically speaking, under present circumstances is to resist existing forms of unfreedom. That said, we should remember that Adorno was not spared, to the extent that we have been, the experience of living through singularly appalling events. This should at least help us to understand *ad hominem* why Adorno took the view that the social world is radically evil as the point of departure for his ethics and his social theory.⁵⁰

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¹ Habermas describes the project of negative dialectics as 'a turn to the irrational'. Habermas 1995: 37. H. Schnädelbach makes the same objection to Adorno. 'Dialektik als Vernunftkritik. Zur Konstruktion des Rationalen bei Adorno' in Habermas 1983: 9.

² Literally translated this means: 'There is no correct living in the False' where 'the False' is a deliberate inversion of 'the True' in Hegel's famous dictum from the Preface to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 'Das Wahre ist das Ganze.' Hegel 1986: 24. As always, though, the most literal translation would be ugly and unhelpful.

³ Geuss 1999: 103.

⁴ See Adorno's motto to *Minima Moralia* by Ferdinand Kürnberger 'Life does not live' [*Das Leben lebt nicht*] MM 19.

⁵ Geuss 1999: 97.

⁶ Kant 1960: 21 & 27. Some Neo-Platonists and Gnostics also believe that the mundane world is evil, but the parallel with Kant is stronger, since Adorno and Kant both equate evil with unfreedom and heteronomy.

⁷ 'Whoever wills the end, so far as reason has decisive influence upon him, wills the indispensably necessary means to that end.' Kant 1987: 80-81. Kant and Adorno fail to distinguish between the normative authority and the motivational force of instrumental reasons. See n.8 below.

⁸ According to Hampton and Korsgaard Kant is wrong on this point. See Hampton 1986: 92-107 and Korsgaard 1997: 234-50. And if Kant is wrong, so is Adorno.

⁹ More than any other term for making equal perhaps the Nazi word '*Gleichschaltung*' (to force into line, or make something conform) is most redolent with violence, simply because a lot of real violence was perpetrated under that description.

¹⁰ Adorno is very consistent in not exempting his own theory from this charge. Indeed one can say that most of the difficulties and the novelties of Adorno's theory arise from the way in which it applies to itself.

¹¹ Schnädelbach 1984: 129.

¹² In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno notes that, '[b]rutality towards things, is potentially brutality towards people.' AT 232

¹³ 'I would say...that what you have termed autonomy and self-responsibility today essentially consists altogether in the resistance of people, in that they try to see through these mechanisms and that they themselves yet somehow rebel against these mechanisms. Morality has transformed itself nowadays into the resistance against this blind force, against this predominance of the merely existent, under which fact we all must suffer today.' CM 297

¹⁴ The same goes for much current use of the phrase 'the political'.

¹⁵ Adorno also speaks of 'resistance against all that has been imposed on us, and what the world has made of us' PDM 248, of 'resistance against the bad' PDM 254, and of resistance 'against the innumerable externally imposed forms of morality' PDM 252.

¹⁶ Adorno argues that this 'new categorical imperative' not only provides our normative orientation to the social world, but that it should form the substantive (albeit negative) telos of all education after Auschwitz. 'Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to the single ideal: never again Auschwitz.' 'Education after Auschwitz' in CM 91.

¹⁷ 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' in Kant, vol. XI, 1798: 53. Actually Kant has much more to say about *Unmündigkeit*, the capacity not to be able to think for oneself, than he does about *Mündigkeit*. See also 'Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht' where Kant makes clear that natural immaturity (minority) is only one example of a broader conception of *Unmündigkeit*. Women, even if adult and therefore not naturally immature, are always legally *unmündig*. Kant: vol. XII, 1798: 521-2.

¹⁸ Adorno seems to be using '*Mündigkeit*' in accordance with its original pre-Kantian meaning of having the ability to stand up for oneself, [from 'Mund = 'Schutz' (protection)] rather than the narrower meaning which Kant gives the term. Thanks to a referee for this journal pointing this out.

¹⁹ Adorno is correct to assume that for Kant autonomous *moral* reasoning is a particular instance of *Mündigkeit* - the use of one's own understanding - i.e. an instance of a much broader sense of intellectual autonomy.

²⁰ See Theunissen 1983: 42.

²¹ This Platonic-Hegelian conception of truth underlies Adorno's rather reckless suggestion that any proposition, which is true merely in virtue of its correspondence to the facts, is untrue: 'No unreflected banality can, as an imprint of a false life, still be true.' ND 45 A statement that aspires merely to be correspondence-true to the facts of a false social world is untrue, firstly because it identifies and thus misrepresents what is, secondly, because it thereby fails to aim at the good.

²² Oddly enough, given Adorno's characteristic suspicion that all forms of political praxis are adventitious, he even goes so far as to suggest that given the circumstances 'the quest for the good life' must give way to the 'quest for the right form of politics.' See Jay 1984:110 and Geuss 1999: 103.

²³ See for example AT 30-1 & ND 373-4.

²⁴ Ulrich Kohlmann seeks an answer to the epistemological question of how we know what inhumanity is in Adorno's treatment of the 'Schmerz-Impuls' in *Negative Dialectics*. Kohlmann 1996: 96-103 This seems to me to be unsatisfactory for the following reasons. My knowledge that my pain is bad is immediate and first personal. My knowledge that other people's pain is bad for them is neither. I have no immediate first personal knowledge that your pain is bad for you, or that pain is bad in general. Moreover, Adorno's claim that the social world is false or radically evil is much more far-reaching and complex even than the claim that pain or suffering is bad in general. For example, Adorno admits that some of the forms of institutionalized unfreedom, with which human beings may willingly cooperate - say by listening to light music, or watching television - may be very enjoyable in a 'culinary' and unchallenging way, and thus not painful at all. Nonetheless, Adorno claims that the culture industry, which functions as a mechanism for achieving social conformity, is very much part of the radically evil social world.

²⁵ Adorno was often criticized in later life for his retreat from all political praxis. For Adorno's reply to this accusation, see his essay 'Resignation' in CM 289-93 and also ND 374.

²⁶ 'Education after Auschwitz' in CM: 191-205 & 298-9. See also P. U. Hohendahl 'Education After the Holocaust' in Hohendahl 1995: 45-75.

²⁷ Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks' in NL1: 91-8. See also HTS 101-2.

²⁸ Theunissen 1983: 57.

²⁹ See also HTS 102. 'If philosophy can be defined at all, it is an effort to express things one cannot speak about, to help express the non-identical despite the fact that expressing it identifies it at the same time.'

³⁰ Adorno does actually use the latinized word 'das Ineffabile' at least twice in *Negative Dialectics* (e.g. ND 22 'das Ineffabile der Utopie') but I am not attaching

any special significance to his use of that term. He also frequently uses the terms 'das Unsagbare' and 'das Unausdrückliche', which I take to be synonymous with 'das Ineffabile'. To those who may be worried about my collecting these various locutions under one umbrella concept of the ineffable, it should suffice to note that all these terms are general. Nevertheless they all have something in common, namely that they are supposed to denote what cannot be captured by general concepts. See also ND 21, 114 & MCP 118.

³¹ Schnädelbach 1983: 91; Wellmer 1993: 212; Habermas, 1992: 37. Concomitantly Adorno's staunchest supporters tend to want to defend Adorno from the charge of irrationalism by denying the parallel with negative theology. See Finke, S. 1999.

³² The Jewish negative theologian, Solomon Maimonides, (1135-1204) author of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, was also a rationalist, working in the Scholastic tradition.

³³ *De Possess* 20 & 74, cited in Hopkins. J. 1986: 20. See also p. 5.

³⁴ There may be something incoherent here in the thought of an infinite number of potentially infinitely long radii all being of equal length.

³⁵ Ibid. p.22.

³⁶ Moore 2000, 1997, 1993 and 1992. To see just how closely Moore's concerns link up with Adorno's consider the following: 1. Both Moore and Adorno think that the ineffable is of fundamental importance to philosophy; 2. Both think that understanding the relation of the effable to the ineffable can help us to understand what is true and false about transcendental idealism; 3. Both think that reflecting on the way in which language is used can yield ineffable insights.

³⁷ Moore 2000: 191.

³⁸ I think this is implicit in Adorno's claim that the exposition of a thought is not external to it but immanent. 'What is sloppily put, is badly thought.' ND 29. So what cannot be put into words at all, cannot be thought.

³⁹ 'The inside of non-identity is its relation to that which it is not itself [zu dem, was es nicht selber ist] and which its organized, frozen identity with itself, withhold from it.' ND 165.

⁴⁰ This is one point that emerges clearly from one of the knottiest and most intriguing passages of *Negative Dialectics*: 'Knowledge, which wants content, wants utopia. The latter, the consciousness of possibility, inheres in concrete things, because they are not disfigured. It is what is possible, never the what is immediately actual, that bars the way to utopia. In the midst of what exists what is possible therefore appears as abstract. The inextinguishable colour comes from what does not exist [*dem Nichtseienden*] Thought serves this non-existence. It (thought) is a piece of existence, which, negative as always, reaches over to non-existence. Only the remotest distance would be nearness. Philosophy is the prism that captures its colour.' ND 66.

⁴¹ See also ND 396: 'All happiness is but a fragment of the complete happiness which is denied to people and which they deny themselves.'

⁴² I mean 'argument' in the broadest sense of the term, which Adorno, for all his reservations about analytic philosophy never abandoned. See the section on 'Argument and Experience' ND 39-43.

⁴³ In this respect Adorno's thought is diametrically opposed to Karl Barth's theological conception of the humanity of God. Barth sees God's deity as the ultimate ground of his humanity. God makes himself and his goodness available to man by a free act of condescension. 'Without the condescension of God there would be no exaltation of man. As the son of God and not otherwise, Jesus Christ is the Son of Man. This sequence is irreversible. God's independence, omnipotence, and eternity, God's holiness and justice and thus God's deity, in its original and proper form, is the healing power leading to this effective and visible sequence in the existence of Jesus

Christ: superiority preceding subordination. Thus we have here no universal deity capable of being reached conceptually, but this concrete deity – real and recognizable in the *descent*, grounded in that sequence and peculiar to the existence of Jesus Christ.’ Barth 1967: 45. On this point I disagree with Theunissen who sees the ‘theology of the condescension of God’ as the ‘vanishing point’ of Adorno’s attempt to secure the availability of the good. Theunissen 1983: 60.

⁴⁴ Adorno was interested in the relation between happiness [*Glück*] already between the wars. See Wiggershaus 2001: 89. The 6th aphorism of *Minima Moralia* Adorno claims that the detached observer has only one advantage over the busy person ‘the tiny bit of freedom that lies in knowledge as such’ MM 26.

⁴⁵ Moore 1997: 185.

⁴⁶ ‘I really want to say, that a language-game is only possible, if one trusts something.’ Wittgenstein 1977: no. 509. Nicholas sees mathematics as an instrument of knowing – albeit one not fitted for the apprehension of absolute truth – gifted by God to man (OLI 1, 2).

⁴⁷ Perhaps this is what Adorno is getting at in the intriguing passage at ND 66 quoted in n. 40 above.

⁴⁸ In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno notes that, ‘[b]rutality towards things, is potentially brutality towards people’ AT 232. He believes that something similar is true of sensitivity. For Adorno the greatest moral failing, which allowed Auschwitz to happen, was indifference. It is interesting to compare him with Primo Levi, who considered that the greatest moral failing of the Germans was to have been silent, to have failed to speak out. Levi, P. 1989.

⁴⁹ They cannot, however, lead to nihilism, for in every act of resistance there lies buried the hope that things might be different. ND 369.

⁵⁰ This paper has been improved in the light of discussion with Katerina Deligiorgi, Jonathan Nassim, Kenneth Baynes, Peter Dews and Christian Piller. Thanks also to the participants of the Morell Theory Workshop at York, and to the friendly audiences at Anglia University, Cambridge, Sussex University, and at the Villa Lana, Prague. Above all, I would like to thank my colleague Marie McGinn and a meticulous anonymous reviewer (who turned out to be Raymond Geuss) for this journal who gave me some very helpful and interesting comments.

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